

# Classroom Techniques: Silence Can Be Golden in a Writing Class

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*By Edwin Stieve*

Last semester in my writing class, my students and I experimented with silence once a week to provide fresh insights into learning about writing. No one, not even the instructor, spoke during the 55-minute class. We learned new ways of self-expression through writing while gaining confidence as writers.

Mondays were devoted to first-year composition tasks: instructor-led discussions, readings, group work, and presentations. On Fridays, the class learned new word processing and online skills to better prepare writing assignments. But on Wednesdays we used silence to learn.

This article outlines a rationale for using silence in a writing class, describes several activities to do on silent days, and explains the lessons learned from the silence.

## **Silence Builds Communication Skills**

*Silence is golden?*

*Prove it to me!*

*I think silence is as black as can be...*

*Silence itself causes ignorance.*

These lines from "Pitfalls of Silence," which appeared on a web page by Deena Fuller, refer to human collective irresponsibility in not speaking out about global issues, but the message has implications for post/secondary institutions and instructors as well. The site invites comments, and the one below appears after Fuller's poem:

*Sometimes I let my silence speak for me.*

*So much can be said without saying a word....*

Some forms of silence can impede human communication, especially at crucial moments when speaking out verbally would be better. But, in a writing classroom one day a week, being silent can teach important lessons about written communication while strengthening students' and instructors' abilities to express themselves in writing and with immediacy. The strategy of silence in the writing classroom can prove especially useful for nonnative speakers and writers of English.

Traditionally, teaching writing, whether in a class of native or nonnative speakers of English, becomes a process of teaching students to read, write, and revise their work with help from the instructor and classmates, who serve as peer readers. During this interactive writing process, much of the communication between instructor and student and between student and student is verbal. While verbal communication is effective, efficient, and a natural way of communicating

about writing and the writing process, some students may not participate actively in verbal exchanges.

Reading and writing, often done as solitary activities, frequently take place outside the classroom, giving students more time to reflect and compose at leisure. When students do write in class, they often do so in the context of classroom discussions about reading or writing assignments. When writing is the sole activity for an entire class hour, it often occurs as part of an exam or as a response to an instructor's questions.

But, focusing both students and instructor one class day each week completely on communication through writing reinforces instant written communication (students and instructors often pass notes back and forth during class or write questions and responses to questions on the board). For nonnative speakers especially, silence encourages the development of quick written comments and responses to questions. A kind of written conversation style develops in a comfortable atmosphere, which prepares students to write on the spot in more demanding school and career situations. Though more cumbersome than speaking, since it takes longer to exchange ideas in writing than verbally, communicating intensively and solely through written transactions reinforces and expands written skills in many formats. The process thus provides the individual student with expanded opportunities for communicating effectively in real time. The student and writing process take on a new sense of importance.

## **Silent Activities**

On silent days, we did several activities that reinforced written communication skills. Several times during the semester students discussed essays they had read by exchanging written messages. Then, near the end of the class period, they wrote their conclusions on the board. During the following week we used these written conclusions in verbal discussions on reading assignments.

During several other class periods, students wrote chain stories. Each student copied the following sentence onto a sheet of paper: "He didn't like the blue one." Then, each student added a second sentence and passed the writing on to another student. That student read the first two sentences and added a third based on the first two. The process continued as students added sentences to as many narratives as possible, sometimes adding several sentences in different locations to the same piece. When class concluded, we had fifteen different stories, each beginning with the same sentence. During the next silent class, students wrote an analysis of these different essays in response to the question: Why are the narratives so different even though they began with the same sentence?

During several other class periods, I wrote a question about a reading assignment on the board. Class members took turns writing responses to the question on the board while classmates took notes. At the end of class, students drew some conclusions about the readings for themselves in one-paragraph summaries. I compiled and distributed their summaries, and we talked about the differences and similarities among them in our regular Monday verbal discussion.

While assignments such as these can reinforce students' abilities to think and compose on demand, the slowness with which a silent class moves from idea to idea can become tiresome. To avoid this situation, students and instructor periodically need to discuss the vow of silence they have taken. They need to reflect on how being silent forces them to think and interact on paper. Students find that passing notes and discussing in silence can be a productive opportunity to communicate accurately on a moment's notice. Not surprisingly, the quality of these students' in-class essays and exams improved more rapidly during the semester than did in-class essays and exams written by students who didn't have the advantage of a silent Wednesday in the other first-year writing classes I taught.

## Quickly Achieving Results

Throughout the term, as a barometer of their silent day experiences, I asked students for regular evaluations of the silent class experience and commentary on their overall growth as writers and readers. Many commented that although the experience surprised them as a radical way to learn about writing, they found it valuable and as a result felt more confident in their role as writers. One student learned that "writing is much more difficult to do than speaking because you cannot automatically say what you want to say" in a silent classroom. Other students learned to write more concisely: "it [a silent class] taught me how to put on paper what I wanted to say without taking half a page." Mainly, students found that silent Wednesdays became another means for improving their confidence as writers and a useful change from their other classes. Silence, then, could be fun.

Occasional silent days in writing classes, especially in countries where English is not the primary language, have special relevance for learning about writing as process. The temptation is great for students to speak in their native language as a communication shortcut, especially when the language they are learning to write is not their primary language. While speaking in a native language, even as a shortcut naturally occurs, doing so robs students of yet another opportunity to communicate in English in writing as a way of learning. Since written English is usually the last and most difficult hurdle nonnative speakers face, opportunities to communicate in written English reinforce and expand competency. We all learned that silence could, in fact, bring a golden moment in which students and faculty explore communication using written composition as the primary tool.

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Note: The Web site *The Show Email Writers Block*, where Deena Fuller's "The Pitfalls of Silence" was posted, closed January 1, 2000. Other sites of interest to writers are:

- <http://www.freestorycenter.com>
- <http://www.betterkarma.com/apl/>
- <http://www.cafepoetry.com>